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SUBJECT: BHARAT BALLOT '09: MAY 28 SOUTHERN SNAPSHOTS: ELECTION
ROUNDUP

Refs: A) 08 CHENNAI 326, B) CHENNAI 98, C) CHENNAI 100, D)CHENNAI
[11161](#).

[1](#)1. (U) This report is part of a periodic series covering items of
interest in South India not featured in our other reporting. This
edition of "Southern Snapshots" covers:

- Tamil Nadu: Parties unable to leverage the plight of Sri Lanka's
Tamils for political gain
- Andhra Pradesh: Sops trump TVs
- Karnataka: BJP bucks national trend and strengthens its foothold
in South India
- Kerala: Communists routed

Tamil parties bet on Sri Lanka and lose

[1](#)2. (U) Some small-but-noteworthy parties in Tamil Nadu overestimated
the willingness of the electorate to abandon Congress in favor of
any party that rallied publicly and loudly to the cause of Sri
Lanka's ethnic Tamils, with Congress and its allies in the state
(the DMK and VCK) winning 28 of the state's 39 seats. S. Ramadoss's
PMK (part of Congress's national alliance until departing in April
to ally with the DMK's main opponent) is especially strong in
northern Tamil Nadu and has demonstrated a particular skill at
aligning with winning parties in the state. It also hoped to
capitalize on the anticipated sentiments of a public angry at the
plight of ethnic Tamils in Sri Lanka and the unwillingness of the
Congress-and-DMK GoI to press harder for an end to the fighting. In
the event, however, the PMK failed to win any of the seven
constituencies it contested.

[1](#)3. (U) The MDMK, a party with links to the Liberation Tigers of
Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and whose raison d'etre revolves around
supporting the Sri Lankan Tamils' cause, did win one of the four
seats it contested. The party's obstreperous and oft-arrested
leader Vaiko, however, failed to win in his hometown, losing to a
first-time Congress Party candidate, Manicka Tagore.

[1](#)4. (SBU) The Sri Lankan issue did seem to have traction in at least
one race, however. Union Home Minister Chidambaram (Congress Party)
squeaked out a victory in the last hour of vote-counting by a mere
3354 votes. His main opponent (from the DMK's arch-rival AIADMK)
was leading all day in the counting and at the end of the
penultimate round, Chidambaram and his team apparently stormed
angrily out of the room where the counting was taking place.

Supporters of his AIADMK opponent took this as an admission of defeat and began celebrating the apparent victory by lighting off firecrackers while TV channels called the election in AIADMK's favor. Dramatically, however, Chidambaram's tally surged ahead in the final round and he was elected after the last count, much to the consternation of Chidambaram's opponents, some of whom alleged fraud.

¶5. (SBU) Chidambaram's son (and campaign manager), Karti, told us that Tamil groups supportive of the LTTE had targeted all the top candidates of the Congress party, including Chidambaram, intensively campaigning in traditional Congress constituencies. He admitted that these efforts had hurt Congress's candidates, reducing their margins of victory, particularly in rural areas, where the pro-LTTE campaign enjoyed more popularity. Nonetheless, the young politico was elated after the victory: "I told my father that we have won the most difficult election," he said, "and we can win any future one."

Congress subsidies trump TV sets in AP

¶6. (U) The Congress Party steamrolled its way through Andhra Pradesh, winning both the national- and state-level elections, which were held concurrently. Congress won 33 of AP's 42 parliamentary seats (up from 29 in 2004) and 155 of its 294 state legislative assembly seats (down from 185 in 2004). The state-level victory makes Chief Minister Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy (or YSR, as he is commonly known) the only Congress Chief Minister in the state since 1982 to be re-elected for a second consecutive term.

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¶7. (U) Chandrababu Naidu, head of Congress's main challenger, the TDP, had promised free color television sets for voters and a cash transfer scheme of INR 2000 (USD 40) per month to each poor household. Voters were unimpressed, however, preferring the incumbent Congress party and YSR's record of sops, handouts, and big-spending projects like free electricity to farmers, mammoth irrigation projects, healthcare facilities and housing for the poor, fee reimbursement for poor students, and reservations (quotas in civil service jobs and university slots, for example) for disadvantaged Muslims.

¶8. (U) Star power also failed to generate much heat among Andhra's voters. Telugu-language film star Chiranjeevi and his Praja Rajyam Party (PRP), waging their first election campaign, managed to win only 18 seats in the state's legislative assembly and no seats in the Lok Sabha. Given the massive publicity surrounding his political debut, this disappointing performance (his party received only 17 percent of the vote -- high for a normal first-timer, but far below expectations) was a flop.

Karnataka BJP bucks national trends and strengthens its foothold in South India

¶9. (U) The BJP strengthened its South India political base in Karnataka, winning 19 of the state's 28 Lok Sabha seats, one more than in the 2004 elections. As expected, the party did particularly well in the northern and central districts (ref D). The only surprise was the BJP's strong showing in Bangalore and coastal Karnataka, where some had predicted that attacks in the area by extremist Hindu groups on churches and pub-goers (refs A-C) might hamper the party's electoral prospects. Instead, the region tilted heavily towards the BJP, which took all four coastal districts and all three of Bangalore's urban constituencies.

¶10. (U) Perhaps more impressive than BJP's one-seat increase are the gains the party made in the popular vote, winning 41 percent, up from 34 percent in 2004 (and up from the 34 percent of the popular vote it received in the state assembly elections in May 2008). Bucking the national trend, the BJP's unabashed pro-Hindu tendencies reaped electoral dividends throughout the state. In the Dakshin Kannada district (containing the city of Mangalore, which witnessed episodic outbreaks of Hindu extremist violence in the past year),

for example, BJP rookie Nalin Kumar Kateel defeated Congress veteran Janardhana Poojary by 40,000 votes (or about five percent of the votes cast). In Bangalore, South India's most cosmopolitan city, the BJP's candidates handily took all three of the urban districts by margins of approximately four to six percent of votes cast.

¶11. (U) The Congress Party managed to increase its share of the popular vote to 38 percent, up from 36 percent in 2004, but won only six seats, down from eight in the previous elections. The regional Janata Dal-Secular (JDS) took the state's other three seats (including one for former Prime Minister H.D. Devegowda), but saw its share of the popular vote decline from 20 percent in 2004 to 13 percent this time.

Kerala's Communists routed

¶12. (U) Kerala's voters maintained their typical pattern of throwing out incumbents, handing the Communists a major setback in the state. In the previous Lok Sabha election in 2004, the Communist-led Left Front won 18 of the state's 20 seats. This time, it mustered only 4 seats, while Congress and its allies took 16.

¶13. (U) In a much-anticipated race in the state's capital of Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum), former UN Under-Secretary General Shashi Tharoor, a debutant in electoral politics who contested as a Congress candidate, won impressively, apparently surprising even himself. On counting day, Tharoor told the press that he expected to eke out a narrow victory, but he went on to win nearly 100,000 more votes more than his nearest rival, beating him by nearly six percent of the votes cast.

¶14. (U) Tharoor's high-profile candidacy had attracted much national attention, as Leftist parties mounted a vigorous campaign against

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him, castigating him as an "American agent" and a "Zionist" for alleged pro-Israel sentiments in his writings. Tharoor, who was thrust into the fray by the Congress Party's leadership, also faced disgruntled local Congress workers in Thiruvananthapuram who initially resisted his carpet-bagging candidacy (he was born in London and lived almost all of his life outside of India, although his family's roots are in Kerala). Tharoor's limited local language capability was yet another handicap, but he managed to overcome this disability with a spirited campaign.

KAPLAN